Introduction

House in a Box: Prefabricated Housing in the Jackson Purchase Cultural Landscape Region, 1900-1960

Imagine selecting a house from a catalogue and having it delivered in a package complete with windows, doors, trim, and roofing materials ready for assembly. The idea of receiving a house in a box may seem unusual, but surprisingly there are houses in twentieth century neighborhoods that originally arrived in such a bundle. Prefabricated houses, though modest in scale with few distinguishing characteristics to make them noticeable in urban, suburban, and rural areas across the country, actually contributed greatly to twentieth century American domestic architecture. What makes prefabricated housing significant in American cultural history?

Designed and produced throughout the twentieth century, prefabricated houses were developed to satisfy the public's insatiable demand for new, modern houses. For the first time working and middle-class families had the opportunity to purchase their first house. Coming out of a period where people typically lived with extended families or rented apartments, prefabricated housing offered an opportunity to have modern amenities and spacious quarters. Additionally, prefabricated dwellings were relatively easy to erect and often cost less than custom-built or speculative-built houses. Prefab houses provided new avenues of home ownership to populations that may have otherwise been left out of this important aspect of the American Dream.

An Ohio family with their Gunnison house. Photo courtesy of David Morgan.

Housing shortages created by the United States' expanding population and increasing industrialization provided a ready market for prefab houses. Burgeoning company towns were also attracted to the convenience of prefabricated housing. In areas where labor and materials were sparse, a prefabricated house could be selected to provide quality housing in

an accelerated time frame. Prefab manufacturers answered the call for immediate housing from the turn of the twentieth century to the post-World War II era, and beyond.

Employing methods of assembly-line production, prefabricated house manufacturing capitalized on advances in building technology and materials. The factory production of prefab houses distinguished them from conventionally built houses. Commonly known as "prefab" or "kit" houses, these packaged houses were constructed with wood, steel, plywood, or even pre-cast concrete. Architecturally, styles ranged from traditional to very modern or even avant-garde.

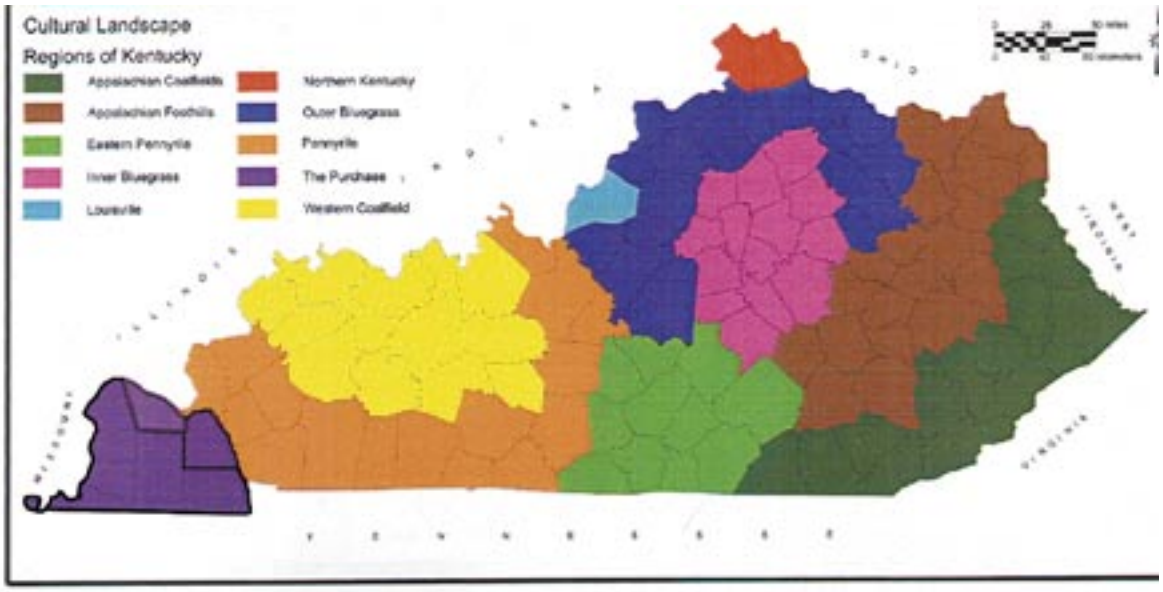
Much of this housing was chosen directly by the consumer through mass-mailed catalogues or advertisements in magazines. Some prefab manufacturers, however, marketed houses through a local or regional dealer. Once the prospective homeowner chose a design, the prefab house would arrive from the factory, by train or truck, to the building site in a bundle. Then, either the homeowner or a local contractor constructed the kit or prefab house on the house lot. Assembling a prefab house only took a few days.

To some, prefab or kit houses have become synonymous with Sears, Roebuck and Company catalogue home. While Sears was an early pioneer in the effort to produce affordable mass housing, it was never the only producer. Rather, there were a number of small and large companies during the twentieth-century that were quite popular within their shipping and sales region. Important producers of prefabricated housing include: Sears, Aladdin Homes, Gordon-Van Tine, Wardway (Montgomery Ward), Lewis, and Sterling. Regional companies located in Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky were substantial producers of prefab housing including: Gunnison Homes Inc., National Homes Corporation, Lustron, Steelcraft, Peaseway Homes, and General Plywood Corporation. In a variety of forms prefab houses took their place alongside conventionally constructed houses, contributing to America's expanding twentieth-century housing

A Sears, Roebuck and Company "Uriel" house in Anderson County.

stock. The impact of prefab houses in American domestic architecture has been important and enduring.

The twentieth century phenomenon of prefabricated housing, produced at factories and selected by customers, is the focus of this study undertaken by the Kentucky Heritage Council / State Historic Preservation Office (KHC), and the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC) as a mitigation project for a United States Army Corp of Engineers (ACE) undertaking in Graves County. This housing study will examine prefabricated housing from 1900 to 1960 in an eight-county area defined by the Kentucky Heritage Council as the Jackson Purchase Cultural Landscape Region, encompassing the counties of Ballard, Calloway, Carlisle, Fulton, Graves, Hickman, Marshall, and McCracken. Formally established as a cultural landscape region by the Kentucky Heritage Council in the 1980s to serve as a



Map of Kentucky reflecting the Kentucky Heritage Council's Cultural Landscape Regions. The two counties outlined in the Jackson Purchase Region are McCracken and Marshall, which served as case study survey areas for this report. (Source: "A Cultural Historic Survey of the Proposed Telecommunication Tower Site West of Future City, McCracken County, Kentucky).

planning unit to research historic themes and develop preservation contexts, the Jackson Purchase Cultural Landscape Region will be the focus of this prefabricated housing study.

The area defined as the Jackson Purchase Cultural Landscape was ideally situated for the development of prefabricated housing. Many of the producers that manufactured prefabricated housing types were located within a 200-mile radius of the region. Additionally, the

proximity of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers as well as significant rail routes made the area attractive for industrial development. In turn, the need for worker housing increased with the continued industrial growth of the region. Prefabricated housing was ideally suited to meet these needs.

Though research and survey attention in all eight counties of the Jackson Purchase Cultural Landscape Region is needed for the study of prefabricated housing, time constraints for producing this report necessitated the selection of case study areas within the region. A desire to examine the prefabricated phenomenon in urban, suburban, and rural areas led to the selection of two counties. Paducah and surrounding environs in McCracken County and the communities of Benton and Calvert City in Marshall County served as case studies for the documentation and evaluation of prefabricated houses. Fieldwork in these areas was conducted to gain insight into the status of extant resources associated with prefabricated housing in the Jackson Purchase Cultural Landscape Region.

This report is organized into four sections. The first section includes the project methodology. This section will detail the methods and sources that were utilized to produce this report. In the second section, a historic context for the prefabricated housing industry is examined. Factors that contributed to the development of prefabricated housing will be discussed. Producers of prefabricated housing and their designs, as well as construction techniques will be explored in this section. Assistance in identifying prefab housing in the field is also discussed. The third section is comprised of both an evaluation of prefabricated domestic resources and the results from the field survey in the case study counties. Registration requirements for evaluation of significance and integrity considerations are incorporated within this third section. Brief county histories and reporting of fieldwork for extant resources are also offered in this portion of the report. The final section includes a conclusion and discuss suggestions for future research.

It is important to note that this study is not intended to be a definitive work on prefabricated housing. Because there has been very little work done on the topic, this report can only begin a dialogue to address questions of identification of prefab resources and their eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. In spite of this provisional nature, it is hoped that this report will aid researchers in identifying and evaluating prefabricated domestic resources.

Section I. Methodology

The Kentucky Heritage Council (KHC) initiated a study of prehabricated house in the Jackson Purchase region in February 2006. In April of 2005, the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC), the Kentucky Heritage Council, and the United States Army Corp of Engineers (ACE) entered into a Memorandum of Agreement to mitigate the adverse effects to the historic Aladdin "Norwood" kit house in Mayfield, Kentucky dating from 1924, which had been determined eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C. The KYTC proposed construction of KY 80 from the US 45 Bypass to the KY 121 Truck Route south of Mayfield in Graves County, Kentucky which resulted in the demolition of this historic property. Because the house was eligible for the National Register and transportation officials needed better standards of significance and integrity for prefab resources, KYTC funded a study of prefabricated housing in the region of western Kentucky known as the Jackson Purchase Cultural Landscape Region. The project was conducted under the supervision of the Kentucky Heritage Council's Site Identification Program Manager and produced by a Research Assistant hired specifically for the project. The KYTC Historic Preservation Coordinator Rebecca Turner was also essential in developing this study.

Research Design

The Prefabricated Housing study is an examination of resources related to the various forms of prefabricated housing during the early- and mid-twentieth century in the eight county area known as the Jackson Purchase Cultural Landscape Region. Because of the short time frame in which to produce this report and the cultural/historic commonalities shared within the region, the decision was made to select two counties to represent the Purchase region. Survey and research was done in these two sample counties, allowing for a concentrated examination of prefabricated housing in urban, suburban, and rural contexts. Since very little survey work has been done to document prefab houses, the need for this study is timely because many are becoming old enough to qualify for the National Register of Historic Places as they turn 50 years in age.

Primary and secondary sources were consulted at the inception of the project to gain insight into the different property types that might be encountered during field study. Primary sources used for research in this report include Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, other historic maps, prefab manufacturer's catalogues, and trade journals. Secondary sources provided historic context information for both prefabricated housing and local historical development in the case study counties.

Additionally, two prefabricated housing historians were consulted to give a perspective on their research findings. Jerry Cecil of Winchester, Kentucky has studied Sears, Aladdin, and Gordon-Van Tine associated precut houses. Randy Shipp of the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government Historic Preservation Office is considered an expert on Gunnison Homes research. Randy also has research on National Homes and Peaseway panelized prefab houses. Research and field work from both of these architectural historians proved quite useful during the course of the research.

From these sources four distinct types of prefabricated construction methods were identified: precut, panelized, sectional, and preassembled systems. (See Section II, 40-58 for more information on these specific property types). According to industry statistics, the predominant number of prefab housing was constructed from either precut or panelized building methods. Sectional and preassembled types were less prolific. Primary and secondary sources also provided information about the physical appearance of prefab houses to help aid in identification in the field.

Fieldwork was conducted in the second and fourth week of March 2006 to identify and evaluate associated resources in the two case study counties, McCracken and Marshall. The majority of the survey work completed was at the reconnaissance level due to time constraints and accessibility to resources. Intensive level survey work was however accomplished in Paducah where access to the interior of several prefabricated houses was secured. The results of the case study county fieldwork are located in Section Three of this report.

Information Sources

There is still much more information needed to gain insight into the prefabricated house industry of the twentieth-century. A fair amount of research has been accomplished concerning prefabricated houses associated with *precut* house types like Sears and the Aladdin Company. Probably the most well known secondary source about *precut* houses is Katherine

Cole Stevenson's and H. Ward Jandl's *Houses by Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company*. Sears House Researcher, Rosemary Thorton also has published two books, *The Houses that Sears Built* and *Finding the Houses that Sears Built,* which provided useful information on identifying Sears houses specifically. The sources are primarily focused on the resources associated with Sears precut houses.

Since Sears was not the sole manufacturer of *precut* houses, additional sources were consulted to identify other manufacturers involved with this type of prefabrication. Robert Schweitzer and Michael W.R. Davis' *America's Favorite Homes: Mail-Order Catalogues as a Guide to Popular 20th-Century Houses* discussed not only the history of prefabrication but illuminates numerous companies involved in *precut* house production. Also available are several reprints of catalogues by Dover Publications for Wardway Homes, Aladdin, Gordon-Van Tine, and Sears. Additionally, the online archive, http://clarke.cmich.edu/aladdin/Aladdin.htm, at the Clarke Historical Library at Central Michigan University details the history of the Aladdin Company through catalogues from 1908 until 1954. There are also several websites for Sears precut houses, which are listed in the Bibliography of this report.

These sources can assist the researcher in identifying *precut* houses, though none should be considered definitive. It is certainly worth looking at all of these sources before deciding which company might have been responsible for the *precut* house in question's origins. Project staff found that some historic resources thought to be a particular type of *precut* house identified in field guides, were in fact not associated with a prefab manufacturer at all. This was revealed during a more thorough investigation of the interior, and through measuring the exterior dimensions of the house. This result illustrates the difficulty in positively identifying a *precut* house based on exterior appearance alone.

Published literature concerning other types of prefabricated housing including panelized, sectional, and preassembled property types is not as developed as the precut sources. Some useful sources that project staff consulted to do research on these types of prefabricated houses include *The Prefabrication of Houses, Prefabs on Parades, A Practical Guide Prefabricated Houses,* and *The Prefabricated Home*, noted in the bibliography. These sources provided insight into the production and manufacturers of prefab housing associated with panelized, sectional, and preassembled property types. These sources also contained some examples of house designs that prefab manufacturers offered. For Lustron Houses, a type of *panelized* prefab, there are a few online sources that provide historic context on their production and also fur-

nish images of these prefab houses. A listing of these websites is located in the Bibliography of this report. At this point, there have been no other websites devoted to other major producers of prefabricated housing. Unfortunately, no single comprehensive field guide of all prefabricated house types exists at this time.

Some catalogues offered by panelized prefabricated housing manufacturers were located in private collections of architectural historians consulted for this project and original purchasers of prefab homes. Gunnison Homes, National Homes, and Capp Homes produced promotional literature detailing floor plans and styles of prefab houses available from their product lines. At this time, there is no public repository that contains product manufacturers catalogs.

Though this project did not allow time to investigate all available trade journals, an extensive collection of prefabricated house journals is housed at the Cincinnati Public Library including *Prefabricated Homes* (published 1943 to 1947) and *Prefabrication* (published 1948 to 1949). *PF- The Magazine of Prefabrication* published 1953 to 1958 is available the at University of Louisville library (1958 only) and at the Ohio State University library (full run). These journals would be particularly helpful for researchers attempting to uncover information about panelized, sectional, and preassembled house types. The *Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals* is also an excellent source to locate articles concerning prefabricated housing. Look for articles under the heading "Fabricated Buildings" and "Fabricated Houses." These sources could be a useful way to learn about the different prefab models offered by manufacturers.

Local history sources, such as published local histories, Sanborn maps, and local informants, for the case study counties were also helpful to project staff for chronicling neighborhoods that developed during the period between 1900 and 1960. This local history literature discussed rapid industrial growth that occurred during the period, suggesting that housing might have been urgently needed. Project staff used this information along with historic maps to identify potential areas in the case study counties where prefab housing might be located. Sections Two and Three of this report discuss historic context information for prefabricated housing and the Jackson Purchase Cultural Landscape Region.

Issues with Fieldwork

Locating prefabricated housing in the field can be problematic. Records containing information on prefabricated housing sales for many manufacturers do not exist, have not been

located, or have been destroyed. Since there is no single systematic way to identify the locations of prefabricated houses at this point, the researcher must rely on other methods to find prefab houses in the field. Particularly, examination of local Sanborn maps, if available, allow the researcher to identify areas in which prefabs might exist. It is especially important to look carefully at houses and neighborhoods from 1900 to 1960. Identification presents a challenge to the prefab researcher because many prefabricated houses are hard to verify without more detailed research. Prefabs can rarely be identified by windshield survey, exceptions to this being Gunnison houses, National Homes, and Lustron houses. Tips for researching prefab houses are located in Section Two of this report.

Local informants who might be familiar with neighborhoods or areas where prefabs were constructed can be the most direct way to locate these resources. Initially, local contacts in McCracken County that have previously assisted the Kentucky Heritage Council were consulted. Through these contacts, general areas where prefabricated housing existed were identified. To further this effort, project staff issued press releases published in the case study counties' newspapers. An article in the *Paducah Sun,* proved to be quite fruitful in producing contacts with information about prefabs. This greatly assisted fieldwork in Paducah by giving project staff access to prefabricated houses and locations of neighborhoods containing prefab resources.

The opposite outcome occurred in Marshall County. Previous to this research project, no local contacts in Marshall County had been established. Project staff attempted to develop local informants by contacting the Jackson Purchase Historical Society, the Benton Public Library, and the Marshall County Chamber of Commerce. Unfortunately, there were no volunteers identified to assist with this project. An article about the research study appeared in the Benton *Tribune-Courier,* however, this did not yield any response from local citizens to help identify prefabricated houses in Marshall County. Because of this lack of local support, project staff determined that fieldwork in Marshall County would have to be conducted on a reconnaissance level only. Project staff concluded that having local informants to assist with identification is a crucial element in locating prefabricated housing, since access to interiors is crucial to identifying most precut and some panelized prefabs.

Section Three of this report details the results of the fieldwork in the case study counties, as well as evaluation and integrity assessments for the resources.

It is hoped that this report will begin to inform researchers about prefabricated housing for the purposes of both identification and significance. The next section will develop a general historic context for prefabricated housing on the twentieth-century American landscape. Factors will be outlined that contributed to the growth of prefabricated housing during the period between 1900 and 1960. The production methods and property types associated with prefabricated housing will also be explored in more detail.